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Fall 2006

Latin America and De-centering World History

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Opus Citation

Richard H. Weiner (2006). Latin America and De-centering World History. *World History Bulletin*.22 (2), 6-8.
http://opus.ipfw.edu/history_facpubs/88

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Focus Issue & Teaching Forum

“Latin America in World History”

Richard Weiner

Guest Editor

LATIN AMERICA AND DECENTERING WORLD HISTORY

There appears to be a consensus amongst Latin Americanists that Latin America is marginalized in world history. A recent edition of Hispanic American Historical Review (HAHR) that was dedicated to examining Latin America's position in world history (and especially in world history textbooks) came to this conclusion,¹ and articles by Ben Leeming, Suzanne Pasztor and Rick Warner in this edition of World History Bulletin (WHB) make this same critique. Furthermore, since Pasztor's article originally appeared in a 1997 edition of WHB it seems things have not changed much over the past decade or so. While the scholars writing in HAHR and WHB make several criticisms, there are a couple of recurring overarching complaints. Pasztor voices one of them: “many texts . . . reflect certain biases . . . which . . . suggest to students that . . . [Latin America] is somehow less than crucial to understanding the world.” Pasztor supports this assertion by showing that Latin America is largely left out of the traditional world history narrative. The second objection is intimately linked to the first. Jeremy Adelman, in his contribution in HAHR, puts it this way: “Europe . . . was the agentic history maker and Latin America a reactive place whose history only made sense as part of a logic governed by a whole, a whole that had a distinctly centered European makeup.”² In Adelman's critique Latin America is present in the story, but marginalized and passive nonetheless.

What accounts for Latin America's unimportance in traditional accounts of world history? WHB and HAHR authors both respond to this query, even if the latter concentrate more on the question. One answer emphasizes that world history is a relatively new field of research and teaching. Many world history texts evolved out of older Western Civilization texts. Consequently,

Latin America (and other parts of the Third World) was more of an “add-on” than anything else. This “first in the West, then on to the rest” approach minimizes Latin America's significance.³ (One positive piece of news is that some world history textbooks—especially some of the newer ones—reject this framework.⁴) A second response centers on topics examined: world history's tendency to focus on the “big questions,” particularly related to technology and development, automatically marginalizes less advanced economic regions such as Latin America.⁵ If the first two answers apply to all parts of the so-called “Third World,” the last one is specific to Latin America: Latin America is treated as “atypical.” It does not fit into larger patterns or categories, which makes it difficult to integrate the region into a world history narrative. This perspective suggests Latin America is neither Western nor non-Western. And the region's historical trajectory departs from other colonized regions of the world such as Asia and Africa. When Europeans were colonizing Latin America their dominant form of interaction with Asia and Africa was commercial exchange facilitated by “fortified posts.”⁶

Will this marginalization of Latin America continue? Erick Langer, in his introduction to the HAHR edition on Latin America and world history, makes a number of assertions that suggest that change will not come quickly. He cites practices in the textbook industry which discourage change, the regional/national focus of academic scholarship which thwarts a global research agenda, and heavy teaching loads which hinder instructors from learning more about Latin America.⁷ Langer's contentions are sensible.

Nevertheless, there are two developments that have the potential to counter the status quo. One has to do with specialties within the discipline and hiring practices. At the university level, positions in world history are becoming more prevalent. My impression from reading of the job ads over the past few years is that there is a tendency to fill these world history positions with

*historians who specialize in non-Western regions, including Latin America. Consequently, it is likely that more Latin Americanists will take positions in world history, which will probably increase the region's visibility in world history. This same development is occurring on a smaller geographical scale. More positions in Atlantic history are being created and many of them are being filled by Latin Americanists, who have a framework to insert Latin America into a larger regional context. Now for the second development: some current research trends counter the dominant narrative in world history by paying greater attention to Latin America and other marginalized world regions. Some of these academic trends are present in the HAHR articles as well as those published in this edition of WHB. Acknowledging this research, Langer concludes that the HAHR articles are a “good starting point” in the project of increasing Latin America's visibility in world history.⁸ An umbrella term that all this research might fit under is “decentering,” a word that Adelman employs to elucidate the philosophy he and his co-authors embraced when writing *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*, a world history textbook. “That is,” Adelman explains, “we were aiming to ‘decenter’ Europe.”⁹*

“Decentering” perhaps has a postmodern tone about it. But what struck me is that it resonates with a vision that José Vasconcelos, the influential Latin American intellectual during the age of the Mexican Revolution, articulated.¹⁰ Vasconcelos acknowledged the dominance of Europe and the United States, but nevertheless challenged their hegemony in a number of ways. One way was reminiscent of Adelman's contention that world “centers” come and go, for Vasconcelos showed just that.¹¹ Vasconcelos acknowledged that during his own life time — an era when he said that the coal consuming nations reigned — Mexico was not a dominant world power. But his analysis suggested that previously — during the colonial silver age — Mexico's international influence had been significant and he predicted that in a future era—an epoch when

electricity would determine global power — Mexico would rise again (thanks to the nation's mountainous topography). His observation that in the present-day Americas civilization moved from North to South but during the pre-Columbian era the opposite had been the case also underscored that power centers shifted over time. Perhaps a bit contradictorily, he also “decentered” (to use Adelman’s term) by redefining the attributes of the center in a way that favored Latin America. His notion of greatness comprised not only the traditional topics of economics, politics and modernity, but also less common realms he maintained Latin America was particularly strong in: literature and spirituality.

If “decentering” is not new, it is nonetheless a contemporary scholarly trend that can potentially enhance Latin America’s place in world history (and other marginalized regions of the world for that matter). After all, “decentering” can be construed as an abbreviated way to say contesting Europe’s central place in world history.¹² Even if the articles in this issue of WHB do not employ the term “decenter” they nevertheless do just that by highlighting Latin America’s significance to world history. I have categorized the approaches the articles take into three types of “decentering.” There is nothing systematic or formal about my categories. Rather, I have based them on three general trends in world history scholarship. Undoubtedly, others would divide the literature up according to different criteria. Additionally, there is no clean line between the “types” since there is a large degree of overlap. In fact, some articles fit under more than one. Let me briefly explain these “types.” The first one challenges Europe’s centrality by focusing not on winners and losers in the race to modernity, but rather transnational connections. In this scholarship emphasis is mostly put on how the global puzzle parts link together as opposed to which nations have superior “pieces.” A second “type” contests the dominant world history narrative by telling an unconventional story. My third “decentering” type, the one least frequently used in this group of WHB articles, challenges the conventional narrative not by telling a new one, but rather by contending that Latin America’s role in the standard story has been undervalued.

The increasing popularity of the first “type” is perhaps, in part, a consequence of all the attention to “globalization” over the past decade or so, which has encouraged scholars to look at a wide variety of links between different world regions. Paradoxically, a scholarly reaction against some general assumptions about globalization has also inspired an examination of transnational and cross-cultural interactions. Historians, maintaining that globalization has wrongly been conceived as a new phenomenon, have shown that in previous centuries there was a high level of interaction between world regions.¹³ Scholarship on commodity chains is an example of this transnational approach to Latin American history. Scholars trace the international history

of commodities by examining their production, transport, and consumption, thereby linking producers and consumers.¹⁴ Reflecting changing academic concerns, the literature on commodity chains has more of a transnational focus than the dependista brand of Latin American economic history that reigned a generation ago. Dependistas focused on just one aspect of the international economic story: industrialized nations’ impact on Latin America.¹⁵ Many of the articles in the HAHR special edition on world history advocate a transnational and cross-cultural approach. Susan Besse makes the case this way: “Shifting from narratives that emphasizes progress toward ones that emphasize cross-cultural interactions opens many possibilities; not only does it decenter Europe, but it also moves beyond narratives that measure significance by traditional standards of influence and acknowledges the agency (and not just the victimization) of Latin American societies and peoples.”¹⁶

Most of the articles in WHB, to one degree or another, take this cross-cultural approach. Gregory T. Cushman’s piece on Cuban cooking is a particularly inventive example. Cushman employs the novel structure of a recipe for Ajíaco, a popular Cuban stew, to tell a tale of cross-cultural relations that privileges exchange over issues such as hierarchy and power. Indeed, not only are ingredients blended in his recipe, but also a variety of animals, crops, microbes, and peoples from different corners of the globe. Along the way of telling this fascinating transnational story, Cushman finds time to critique scholarship (Alfred Crosby’s *Ecological Imperialism* and Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*), discuss Cuban national identity, and suggest a hands-on classroom activity. Gary Van Valen’s article aptly titled “the Caribbean as Crossroads of World History,” also highlights exchange. After recounting and rejecting a number of definitions of the Caribbean, he settles on a thematic approach in which the region’s defining feature is its “constant and intimate contact with the outside world.” He proceeds to discuss the region’s robust and diverse ties Europe, Africa, the United States, and other parts of Latin America. He maintains that owing to its constant contact with the outside that the Caribbean is more cosmopolitan than some parts of Latin America. He also underlines the region’s significant roles in global trade and production. He further enhances the region’s stature in world history by recounting the ways the Caribbean’s culture (particularly music and literature) has been influential abroad.

If Cushman’s and Valen’s type of decentering increases Latin America’s visibility in world history by emphasizing exchange, René Harder Horst’s and Suzanne Pasztor’s type enhances the region by telling alternative stories. One of the HAHR contributors also champions this latter approach: “Latin America and other marginalized places might be better served—and the history of the world better conveyed—by rewriting the fundamental story.”¹⁷ This approach has an

appeal, especially for those who seek to increase Latin America’s visibility. Indeed, Latin Americanists who study conventional themes are often forced to explain why their region failed. An influential work by Stephen Haber on 19th century Latin American economic development sought to explain why the region fell short. The title underscores the area’s inadequacy: *How Latin America Fell Behind*.¹⁸

Decades ago Octavio Paz, the noted Mexican writer, advocated an approach to development that contrasted sharply with Haber’s.¹⁹ Paz underscored the importance of departing from prevailing scripts to contest the dominance of the developed world. Paz argued that the post World War II binary categories that divided the globe up into developed and underdeveloped regions, or First and Third Worlds, created a master narrative that made Latin America and other parts of the South (the North-South divide was yet another synonymous binary) marginalized. Developed nations, Paz maintained, stacked the deck, in effect, when they created a series of international measuring rods which made them superior to “underdeveloped” nations.²⁰ Horst and Pasztor bring Latin America into the picture by creating new yardsticks, ones that emphasize not modernity, but indigenous peoples of the Americas. Their scholarship seems to build on a general disillusionment with western notions of progress (which tends to valorize alternatives such as indigenous medicines as opposed to western ones) as well as subaltern studies. A classic and influential study of Latin America in this vein is E. Bradford Burn’s *The Poverty of Progress*, a generation-old work that took an indigenous perspective and rejected western notions of progress.²¹ Horst examines the 1930s Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay from the vantage point of indigenous people and shows that they played pivotal roles on both sides. Not only did they have an impact on the military conflict, but also over the long term, for brands of indigenista movements later developed in both countries. Pasztor’s wide-ranging overview of Latin America from the pre-Columbian era to the modern period underscores the resilience of indigenous culture and the significance of indigenous peoples including the Maya and others. Pasztor also discusses several books and films that have proved helpful in her effort to make indigenous people more central to the world history narrative.

Cushman’s piece also falls into the alternative narrative category, for cuisine is generally not featured in world history. His unconventional story is perhaps inspired by Crosby’s work as well as history’s more cultural turn in recent years. The increasing international popularity of Latin American food (especially in the United States) makes cuisine a promising topic to insert Latin America into world history. Micol Seigel’s contribution to the aforementioned HAHR issue also reflects history’s growing interest in cultural themes as well as scholars’ desire to find substi-

tutes to the dominant world history narrative. She advocates a thematic approach to world history and provides a thumbnail sketch of what a global of history of jazz might look like. She contends that this unconventional approach would make Latin America more prominent: "Jazz is a good example of a thematic world history that respects Latin America because so much of the musical exchange provoking and fueling the developments we now call jazz took place south of the Rio Grande and along the border zones within the United States proper."²² Steven Topik's teaching and scholarship on the global history of coffee is an example of the thematic approach that Seigel advocates.²³

Articles in this edition of WHB also make Latin America more prominent by utilizing a strategy that is the antithesis of creating totally new narratives in world history. Ben Leeming's provocative piece on the ancient Americas is the most clear-cut example of this alternative approach, which is the third type of decentering mentioned above. Leeming does not advocate creating a novel story, but rather making Latin America more prominent in the traditional one. He proposes including Peru "as the location of a fifth early complex society alongside those of Sumner, Egypt, Harappa, and China." Currently the Peruvian site is overlooked, as Leeming's review of leading world history textbooks clearly indicates. Leeming's case for including the Peruvian site revolves around queries about the timing and nature of Peruvian societies: when did Peruvian early societies form and how complex were they? He makes a compelling case for including Peru as the fifth early complex society, which is based on an informative discussion of recent research by experts in the field. Rick Warner's short but stimulating essay also makes a strong argument for giving Latin America more visibility in the traditional world history narrative. Warner's topic is important cities in transnational exchange. He laments that "Panama City rarely makes the list of cosmopolitan stopovers in the first half of our modern world history surveys." He makes his case for including Panama based on the city's significant role in the transatlantic silver trade. Along with making Panama an important site in the international economy, silver attracted a colorful cast of cosmopolitan characters — among them pirates — to the city.

Recent scholarship published in other places also enhances Latin America's place in world history by giving the region a more prominent place in a typical narrative. Work by Carlos Marichal on international debt and finance is a case in point. One of his earlier studies showed that while nineteenth century global financial crises usually originated in Europe, at times they started in Latin America (specifically Argentina).²⁴ In a more recent study of colonial international finances he elevated New Spain to the level of "sub-empire" within the Spanish colonial system since much of Spain's overseas expansion into the Spanish Caribbean was financed with Mexican

silver.²⁵ Jaime Rodríguez's work on Latin American independence also bolsters the importance of the region by showing the resilience of political democracy.²⁶ Finally, Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* elevates Latin America's importance by underscoring the importance of the region to Europe's Industrial Revolution.²⁷

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¹ *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84:3 (August, 2004).

² Jeremy Adelman, "Latin America and World Histories: Old and New Approaches to the Pluribus and the Unum," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84:3 (August 2004): 404.

³ Micol Seigel, "World History's Narrative Problem," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84:3 (August 2004): 433.

⁴ See Robert Tignor et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the Modern World from the Mongol Empire to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

⁵ Susan Besse, "Placing Latin America in Modern World History Textbooks," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84:3 (August 2004): 421.

⁶ Lauren Benton, "No Longer Odd Region Out: Repositioning Latin America in World History," *American Historical Review* 84:3 (August 2004): 423-5.

⁷ Erick Langer, "Introduction: Placing Latin America in World History," *American Historical Review* 84:3 (August 2004): 395-6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁹ Adelman, "Latin America and World Histories," 407.

¹⁰ José Vasconcelos, "The Latin American Basis of Mexican Civilization," in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, eds. Manuel Gamio and José Vasconcelos (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), 3-102.

¹¹ Adelman, "Latin America and World Histories," 406.

¹² This is my definition of decentering. The decentering endeavor that Adelman and his co-authors engaged in was more specific than this. Adelman, "Latin America and World Histories," 407.

¹³ An anthology on borders in Latin American history that I co-edited posed a question: to what extent is globalization a new phenomenon? See Raúl Galloppe and Richard Weiner, eds., *Explorations on Subjectivity, Borders, and Demarcations: A Fine Line* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005). For an excellent essay that questions the novelty of globalization see Michael Lang, "Globalization and its History," *The Journal of Modern History* (December 2006) 78:4 [forthcoming].

¹⁴ See Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank, eds., *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin America Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ For a sophisticated classic in this genre see Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). For an extremely popular work in this vein see Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Besse, "Placing Latin America in Modern World History Textbooks," 413-414.

¹⁷ Seigel, "World History's Narrative Problem," 431.

¹⁸ Stephen Haber, ed., *How Latin America Fell Behind* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). John Coatsworth has done some excellent research in a similar vein. He uses statistics to chart changes in comparative regional growth over time. See his work, "Structures, Endowments, and Institutions in the Economic History of Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 40: 3(October 2005): 126-144. By the same

author see "Presidential Address: Welfare," *American Historical Review* 101: 1 (February 1996): 1-12.

¹⁹ Even though Haber's focus is not helpful for elevating Latin America's place in world history I still think it is very useful. The questions he poses were also articulated by 19th century Latin American intellectuals: why are we behind? For studies that examine the ways 19th and 20th century Mexicans wrestled with this question see Richard Weiner, "Economic Thought and Culture in Revolutionary Mexico: Carlos Díaz Dufoo's Critique of the Humboldtian Narrative of Mexico's Legendary Wealth," *História e Economia* (Fall, 2006) [forthcoming]; and Richard Weiner, "El declive económico de México en el siglo XIX: una perspectiva cultural," *Signos Históricos* 12(July-December, 2004): 68-93.

²⁰ Octavio Paz, "Development and Other Mirages," in *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, Octavio Paz (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 238-284.

²¹ E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

²² Seigel, "World History's Narrative Problem," 445.

²³ See Steven Topik and William Gervase Clarence-Smith, eds., *The Global Coffee Economy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, 1500-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁴ Carlos Marichal, *A Century of Debt Crises in Latin America: From Independence to the Great Depression, 1820-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

²⁵ Carlos Marichal, *La bancarrota del virreinato: Nueva España y las finanzas del imperio español, 1780-1810* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999).

²⁶ Jaime Rodríguez, *The Independence of Spanish America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁷ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*.

Cooking a Cuban *Ajiaco*: The Columbian Exchange in a Stewpot

Gregory T. Cushman
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[Images added by WHB]

Ajiaco is a multiethnic stew popular in many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. The Cuban version of this highly-adaptable dish dates back to the sixteenth century. From the beginning, it mixed meats, vegetables, and condiments originating from all over the world. Cuban *ajiaco* provides an ideal vehicle for illustrating the geographical patterns and historical processes of the Columbian exchange: the global interchange of animals, plants, and microbes between the Old and New Worlds in the wake of the Columbian voyages of the late

